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ABSTRACT

Nine primary teachers were interviewed to determine whether their reading beliefs for their classrooms differed from beliefs they might have had if they were teaching either an upper elementary grade or a classroom of students from a socioeconomic (SES) background different from their present classrooms. The teachers stated their beliefs for five groups of readers on eight dimensions of decision making criteria. The results supported the hypothesis that teachers' reading conceptions vary from group to group. The teachers tended to equate low SES pupils with low ability readers and high SES readers with high ability and upper grade readers. (Author/RL)

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THE INFLUENCES OF GRADE AND PUPIL ABILITY LEVELS ON TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS OF READING

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Introduction

Reading theoreticians and researchers continue to focus on the nature of teachers' thought processes for reading instruction. Some maintain that teachers have implicit reading beliefs based on reading models that guide them to instruct in particular ways (Harste & Burke, 1976). In this sense, the teacher with a phonics belief system would be expected to use a phonics instructional approach with readers.

Recent classroom research suggests that teachers' reading beliefs are not based on particular reading models per se but are contingent on such contextual variables as the pupil and his/her environment (Bawden et al., 1979). A survey of some 200 Michigan classroom teachers indicated that teachers may shift their reading beliefs from a skills orientation in lower elementary grades (k-3) to a more pupil centered, interest based reading approach in the upper elementary (4-6) grades (Metheny, (1979).

The influence of teachers' beliefs about learners may bear an impact on good and poor readers in the kinds of instruction they receive and the kinds of reading information they use (see Allington and Chura, 1979, for a discussion of good and poor readers). Given the relationships between teachers' reading beliefs and their instructional methods (Bawden et al., 1979), and, the impact of these methods on learners' reading strategies (Barr, 1975; Cohen, 1975; DeLawter, 1976), careful consideration should be given to the teachers' reading beliefs for different groups of learners. For example, if some teachers believe that low ability readers should receive a grapho-phonic approach while the good readers need semantic-contextual experiences, these beliefs may influence their instructional methods and the learners' reading strategies accordingly.

The hypothesis generated from these studies--that teachers' conceptions of reading vary with grade and pupil reading ability levels--formed the basis for the present study. Teachers' conceptions of reading are defined as those principles or beliefs that govern the teachers' thought processes in reading instruction. This study examines only the teachers' beliefs, not their actual instructional methods or student reading strategies. It investigates if primary teachers' reading beliefs for their current classroom differ from those they might have if (1) they were teaching an upper elementary grade and/or if (2) they were teaching a classroom of students from a socioeconomic background different from their present classroom. The statements each teacher made about her present lowest reading group were compared to those she made for her top reading group, for the classroom as a whole, for an upper grade classroom situation, and for a different socioeconomically based classroom.

Methods

Nine teachers (eight first grade, one second grade) from the Conceptions of Reading Project (CORP) at the Institute for Research on Teaching at Michigan State University were interviewed in May, 1979. These teachers were known to group their children for reading instruction. Each teacher stated her reading beliefs for the five groups of readers using the decision criteria taken from the CORP Reading Propositional Inventory (Duffy and Metheny, 1979). These criteria have been substantiated from the classroom observations as relevant to the kinds of decisions teachers make in reading instruction. These eight dimensions are: 1) criteria for judging pupil reading success, 2) criteria for selecting materials,

3) criteria for forming instructional groups, 4) time allocation to reading activities, 5) time allocation to pupils, 6) favored word recognition prompts, 7) comprehension emphasis, and 8) favored instructional role.

The interviews were structured in the sense that the teachers were given the criteria from which to generate their beliefs for each group. They were allowed to make as many statements as they wanted to convey these beliefs. First, the teacher gave statements for her lowest reading group, secondly, for a classroom of a different socioeconomic background and thirdly, for her highest reading group. Then the teachers gave statements for an upper elementary grade classroom (4th-5th) and finally, for their current classroom as a whole.

On the socioeconomic background conditions, the teachers were given situations that were nearly opposite to their present socioeconomic background levels of their classroom students. Because six of the nine classrooms were in a low to low-middle socioeconomic status level (SES) their teachers were given a high SES situation. In this respect, three teachers received a low SES situation. The six teachers in the high SES condition were told to imagine they were teaching at the same grade level in a high SES classroom. They were told that these children came from affluent homes and their parents were predominately white-collar professionals such as doctors and lawyers. The three teachers in the low SES condition received similar instructions but were told that these children came from low income homes and that their parents were either unemployed or in low paying jobs. For the upper grade level condition, the teachers were asked to imagine they were teaching a fourth or fifth grade classroom. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis and Findings

The interviews were analyzed for the words, phrases, and sentences the teachers used to describe each group of readers. These descriptions provided the data for the analysis.

Each teacher's statements about her lowest reading group were compared to those she made for the contrasting SES classroom situation, her top readers, an upper grade classroom, and her present classroom as a whole group on each of the eight reading criteria. In this comparison, a teacher's statements for a particular group were designated as <u>different</u> if the teacher did not include <u>any</u> of the descriptions she used in talking about her lowest reading group on a criterion. In this sense, her reading conceptions for her lowest reading group and that particular group were considered different. The lowest reading group served as the comparison because it was expected to provide the most contrast in the teachers' reading beliefs across the groups.

The number of teachers whose reading conceptions differed from those they held for their lowest reading group was tallied for each group on each criterion. From this tally, the average percentage of teachers whose conceptions differed for each group was computed across the eight dimensions.

Some major results emerged from the analysis. In descending magnitude, the statements the teachers made about the upper grade readers, top group readers, and high SES readers differed the most dramatically from those beliefs they gave about their lowest group of readers. Eighty-three percent of the nine teachers held different reading beliefs for the upper grade and low group readers. Similarily, 77% of these teachers changed their reading conceptions when they described their beliefs for their top readers. Interestingly, 73% of the six teachers in the high SES condition held dissimilar beliefs for their low group readers and readers from high SES backgrounds.

In contrast, only 17% of the three teachers stating their beliefs about low SES readers held different beliefs for them and their low group readers. Thirty-six percent of the nine teachers held views for their present whole classrooms that differed from their statements made about their lowest group of readers.

This analysis lends support to the hypothesis that teachers' reading beliefs vary across particular reader subpopulations. The teachers believed that upper grade readers were conceptually the most dissimilar to their lowest group of readers, followed closely by their top group and high SES readers. The teachers tended to share similar reading beliefs for the low SES pupils and for the low group readers.

A second analysis of the data provided information on the nature of the reading belief distinctions the teachers held for the reader subpopulations. Their beliefs on each criterion for each group were rank ordered from the most to least repeated. These ranked statements were considered the teachers' conceptions of reading for the group on a criterion. The criteria that provided the most contrast in their reading conceptions across the groups are discussed first.

The kinds of comprehension the teachers believe the groups should receive varied with the reading ability levels of the groups. The teachers generally believed that their lowest group and the low SES readers should receive simple, factual, low level comprehension exercises while the high SES, top group, and upper grade readers should experience higher levels of comprehension in its inferential, critical, and analytical forms. This coincided with their beliefs for allocating time to various reading activities for the groups. Rather than spend their time in oral reading and word attack

activities like the low group and low SES readers, the teachers believed the top group, upper grade, and high SES pupils should spend much more of their time working on high level comprehension activities.

Not only did the teachers believe the low readers and low SES students should receive simple and controlled reading experiences, most of them believed these groups need more direct instructional time and supervision. For example, the teachers felt that their instructional role for the low group and low SES readers should be that of a controlling, step-by-step director. In contrast, this instructional role shifted from that of a controlling director to a more passive, guider-facilitator for the high SES, top and upper grade readers. The teachers explained in their statements for their present whole group classroom that the teacher gives direction to those who need it most; in this case, the low ability readers.

The relationship between reader ability levels and exposure to progressively more complex reading experiences gained further support in the criteria the teachers believed they should use in selecting materials for the groups and for helping them recognize problematic words. The teachers stated that their present highest group of readers, upper grade readers and to an extent, the high SES pupils need materials that are of an interesting and wide variety that challenge and enrich their reading experiences. Likewise, their low group and low SES readers need interesting and fun materials, but for different reasons. They need the materials not as a challenge but as a motivator for learning the basic word attack skills. These materials are devices to circumvent their reading frustrations.

In keeping with material selection, the teachers believed that the low group and the low SES readers should be given phonetic cues for recognizing

unknown words while the high ability (high SES, top group, upper grade) are more equipped to use both phonetic and contextual cues from the teacher. Apparent in these statements is the theme that readers must acquire the basic reading skills before they can progress. These criteria are crucial for grouped reading instruction.

These teachers believed that the pupils essentially group themselves on their word attack skills and on their learning styles. As mentioned earlier, the low groups and the low SES readers are believed to have fewer of these skills and to be less independent and attentive workers. In contrast, the teachers believed that the high SES, upper grade, and top group readers have acquired these skills and are independent workers. They need less supervision, less direct instructional time, and less instructional group time (i.e., more individualization).

Discussion

Several common themes emerged from this investigation. The results supported the hypothesis that teachers' reading conceptions vary for different groups of readers. Generally, the teachers stated a conceptually strong contrast among readers in low groups and low SES situations from those in the top reading groups, upper grades, and in high SES situations. Interestingly, the teachers tended to equate low SES pupils with low ability readers and high SES readers with high ability and upper grade readers.

These teachers tended to share a view of reading that made student acquisition of certain basic word attack skills a prerequisite to the more complex reading and thinking experiences. These experiences are reserved for those readers who have essentially learned to decode. This belief is further evident in that the teachers saw many similarities between their top

primary grade readers and the upper grade readers. At some level, they apparently believe the two groups are separated only by maturity and progressively more difficult reading encounters. Perhaps the younger readers' abilities are not questioned because they have broken the decoding barrier.

This teacher view of reading and learners raises two important points. First, it seems the teachers' beliefs are consistent with the research findings that poor readers process reading information at the phonenic level while the good readers depend more on the semantic level (Mosenthal, Walmsley & Allington, 1978). This suggests that the teachers make such a distinction between their good and poor readers, and may instruct them at these levels. The degree to which a learner depends on a particular processing level of reading may have an important bearing on his/her status as a good or poor reader in the teacher's eyes.

Secondly, this view of reading coincides with the research suggesting that lower elementary grade teachers generally have a skills orientation toward reading and upper elementary teachers have a more pupil interest based reading approach (Metheny, 1979). The present teachers' emphasis on the basic skills for their low ability readers as opposed to the high ability readers' needs for reading enrichment and integration in different subject areas, especially for the upper grade readers, lends support to these findings.

Naturally, this study has limitations. A larger sample of teachers may have produced a greater heterogenity in teacher belief patterns. Since the teachers only stated their beliefs, their actual practices may differ, especially in the two hypothetical situations. No information was used concerning their past teaching experiences in these conditions.

Implications

It appears that the reading conceptions of some teachers depend upon the specitic group of readers with whom they are working. Teachers' conceptions of learners apparently interact with, and may be as important as, their conceptions of the subject matter. The nature of the learner is a contingency not to be ignored in classroom reading research on teachers' thoughts and behaviors.

These findings bear on the current research of good and poor readers. The teachers in this study reserved different reading experiences for the two groups. Their assumption equating reading ability levels with students' socioeconomic backgrounds may have important implications for these readers in classroom reading instruction in such areas as grouping, direct instructional time, and exposure to higher level thinking and reading activities.

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